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THE FEAST OF BELSHAZZAR.

A PRIZE POEM,

RECITED IN THE THEATRE, OXFORD,

JUNE XXIII. M DCCC LII.

BY

EDWIN ARNOLD.

UNIVERSITY COLLEGE.



OXFORD:
FRANCIS MACPHERSON.

M DCCC LII.

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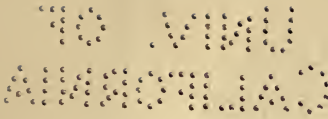
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SYNOPSIS.

“Belshazzar’s impious feast; a handwriting, unknown to the magicians, troubleth the king. At the commendation of the queen Daniel is brought; He, reproving the king of pride and idolatry, readeth and interpreteth the writing. The monarchy is translated to the Medes.”—*Daniel*, ch. 5.

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THE FEAST OF BELSHAZZAR.

*ἀλλ' ἴσθι τοι τὰ σκληρ' ἄγαν φρονήματα
πίπτειν μάλιστα.*

NOT by one portal, or one path alone
God's holy messages to men are known ;
Waiting the glances of his awful eyes
Silver-winged Seraphs do him embassies ;
And stars interpreting his high behest
Guide the lone feet and glad the failing breast—
The rolling thunder and the raging sea
Speak the stern purpose of the Deity,
And storms beneath and rainbow hues above
Herald his anger or proclaim his love :
The still small voices of the summer day,
The red Sirocco, and the breath of May,
The lingering harmony in Ocean shells,
The fairy music of the meadow bells,

4 THE FEAST OF BELSHAZZAR.

Earth and void: Air—Water and wasting Flame
Have words to whisper, tongues to tell his name.
Once—with no cloak of careful mystery
Himself was herald of his own decree ;
The hand that edicts on the marble drew
Graved the stern sentence of their scorner too.—
Listen and learn ! Tyrants have heard the tale,
And turned from hearing terror-struck and pale,
Spiritless captives sinking with the chain
Have read this page and taken heart again.—

From sunlight unto starlight trumpets told
Her king's command in Babylon the old,
From sunlight unto starlight west and east
A thousand satraps girt them for the feast,
And reined their chargers to the palace hall
Where King Belshazzar held high festival :
A pleasant palace under pleasant skies
With cloistered courts and gilded galleries,
And gay kiosk and painted balustrade
For winter terraces and summer shade ;
By court and terrace, minaret and dome,
Euphrates, rushing from his mountain home,
Rested his rage, and curbed his crested pride

To belt that palace with his bluest tide ;
Broad-fronted bulls with chiselled feathers barred
In silent vigil keeping watch and ward,
Giants of granite wrought by cunning hand
Guard in the gate and frown upon the land :
Not summer's glow nor yellow autumn's glare
Pierced the broad tamarisks that blossomed there ;
The moonbeam darting through their leafy screen
Lost half its silver in the softened green,
And fell with lessened lustre, broken light,
Tracing quaint arabesque of dark and white ;
Or dimly tinting on the graven stones
The pictured annals of Chaldæan thrones.—
There, from the rising to the setting day
Birds of bright feather sang the light away,
And fountain waters on the palace-floor
Made even answer to the river's roar,
Rising in silver from the crystal well
And breaking into spangles as they fell ;
Though now ye heard them not—for far along
Rang the broad chorus of the banquet song,
And sounds as gentle, echoes soft as these
Died out of hearing from the revelries.

High on a throne of ivory and gold,
 From crown to footstool clad in purple fold,
 Lord of the east from sea to distant sea
 The king Belshazzar feasteth royally—
 And not that dreamer in the desert cave
 Peopled his paradise with pomp as brave:
 Vessels of silver, cups of crusted gold
 Blush with a brighter red than all they hold;
 Pendulous lamps like planets of the night
 Flung on the diadems a fragrant light,
 Or slowly swinging in the midnight sky
 Gilded the ripples as they glided by:—
 And sweet and sweeter rang the cittern-string
 Soft as the beating of a Seraph's wing,
 And swift and swifter in the measured dance
 The tresses gather and the sandals glance,
 And bright and brighter at the festal board
 The flagons bubble and the wines are poured;
 No lack of goodly company was there,
 No lack of laughing eyes to light the cheer;
 From Dara trooped they, from Daremma's grove
 "The suns of battle and the moons of love;"*
 From where Arsissa's silver waters sleep

* Hafiz, the Persian Anacreon.

To Imla's marshes and the inland deep,
From pleasant Calah and from Sittacene
The horseman's captain and the Harem's queen.—

It seemed no summer-cloud of passing woe
Could fling its shadow on so fair a show—
It seemed the gallant forms that feasted there
Were all too grand for woe, too great for care—
Whence came the anxious eye, the altered tone,
The dull presentiment no heart would own,
That ever changed the smiling to a sigh
Sudden as sea-bird flashing from the sky :—
It is not that they know the spoiler waits
Harnessed for battle at the brazen gates,
It is not that they hear the watchman's call
Mark the slow minutes on the leaguered wall,
The clash of quivers and the ring of spears
Make pleasant music in a soldier's ears :
And not a scabbard hideth sword to-night
That hath not glimmered in the front of fight—
May not the blood in every beating vein
Have quick foreknowledge of the coming pain ?
Even as the prisoned silver, * dead and dumb

* The quicksilver in the tube of the thermometer.

Shrinks at cold Winter's footfall ere he come.—

The king hath felt it and the heart's unrest
 Heaved the broad purple of his belted breast ;
 Sudden he speaks—" What ! doth the beaded juice
 " Savour like hyssop that ye scorn its use ?
 " Wear ye so pitiful and sad a soul
 " That tramp of foemen scares ye from the bowl ?
 " Think ye the gods on yonder starry floor
 " Tremble for terror, when the thunders roar ?
 " Are we not gods ? have we not fought with God ?
 " And shall we shiver at a robber's nod ?
 " No—let them batter till the brazen bars
 " Ring merry mocking of their idle wars—
 " Their fall is fated for to-morrow's sun,
 " The lion rouses when his feast is done—
 " Crown me a cup—and fill the bowls we brought
 " From Judah's temple when the fight was fought—
 " Drink, till the merry madness fill the soul
 " To Salem's conqueror in Salem's bowl—
 " Each from the goblet of a God shall sip
 " And Judah's gold tread heavy on the lip."*

* " He never drinks

But Timon's silver treads upon his lip." *Shak. Tit. Andr.*

The last loud answer dies along the line,
The last light bubble bursts upon the wine,
His eager lips are on the jewelled brink,
Hath the cup poison that he doubts to drink ?
Is there a spell upon the sparkling gold,
That so his fevered fingers quit their hold ?
Whom sees he where he gazes ? what is there
Freezing his vision into fearful stare ?
Follow his lifted arm and lighted eye
And watch with them the wondrous mystery.—

There cometh forth a hand—upon the stone,
Graving the symbols of a speech unknown ;
Fingers like mortal fingers—leaving there
The blank wall flashing characters of fear—
And still it glideth silently and slow,
And still beneath the spectral letters grow—
Now the scroll endeth—now the seal is set—
The hand is gone—the record tarries yet.—

As one who waits the warrant of his death,
With pale lips parted and with bridled breath—
They watch the sign and dare not turn to seek

Their fear reflected in their fellows' cheek—
But stand as statues where the life is none,
Half the jest uttered—half the laughter done—
Half the flask empty—half the flagon poured,—
Each where the phantom found him at the board
Struck into silence—as December's arm
Curbs the quick ripples into crystal calm.—

With wand of ebony and sable stole
Chaldæa's wisest scan the spectral scroll—
Strong in the lessons of a lying art
Each comes to gaze, but gazes to depart—
And still for mystic sign and muttered spell
The graven letters guard their secret well—
Gleam they for warning—glare they to condemn—
God speaketh,—but he speaketh not for them.—

Oh! ever, when the happy laugh is dumb
All the joy gone, and all the anguish come—
When strong adversity and subtle pain
Wring the sad soul and rack the throbbing brain—
When friends once faithful, hearts once all our own
Leave us to weep, to bleed and die alone—
When fears and cares the lonely thought employ,

And clouds of sorrow hide the sun of joy—
When weary life, breathing reluctant breath
Hath no hope sweeter than the hope of death—
Then the best counsel and the last relief
To cheer the spirit or to cheat the grief,
The only calm, the only comfort heard
Comes in the music of a woman's word—
Like beacon-bell on some wild island-shore,
Silverly ringing in the tempest's roar,
Whose sound borne shipward through the midnight
 gloom
Tells of the path, and turns her from her doom.

So in the silence of that awful hour
When baffled magic mourned its parted power—
When kings were pale and satraps shook for fear,
A woman speaketh—and the wisest hear—
She—the high daughter of a thousand thrones
Telling with trembling lip and timid tones
Of him the Captive, in the feast forgot,
Who readeth visions—him, whose wondrous lot
Sends him to lighten doubt and lessen gloom,
And gaze undazzled on the days to come—
Daniel the Hebrew, such his name and race,

Held by a monarch highest in his grace,
He may declare—Oh!—bid them quickly send,
So may the mystery have happy end!—

Calmly and silent as the fair full moon
Comes sailing upward in the sky of June—
Fearfully as the troubled clouds of night
Shrink from before the coming of its light—
So through the hall the Prophet passed along,
So from before him fell the festal throng—
By broken wassail-cup, and wine o'erthrown
Pressed he still onward for the monarch's throne—
His spirit failed him not—his quiet eye
Lost not its light for earthly majesty ;
His lip was steady and his accent clear,
“ The king hath needed me,—and I am here.”—

“ Art thou the Prophet? read me yonder scroll
“ Whose undeciphered horror daunts my soul—
“ There shall be guerdon for the grateful task,
“ Fitted for me to give, for thee to ask—
“ A chain to deck thee—and a robe to grace,
“ Thine the third throne and thou the third in place.”

He heard—and turned him where the lighted wall
Dimmed the red torches of the festival,
Gazed on the sign with steady gaze and set,
And he who quailed not at a kingly threat
Bent the true knee and bowed the silver hair,
For that he knew the King of kings was there—
Then nerved his soul the sentence to unfold,
While his tongue trembled at the tale it told—
And never tongue shall echo tale as strange
Till that change cometh which must never change.

“ Keep for thyself the guerdon and the gold—
“ What God hath graved, God’s prophet must unfold ;
“ Could not thy father’s crime, thy father’s fate
“ Teach thee the terror thou hast learnt too late—
“ Hast thou not read the lesson of his life,
“ Who wars with God shall strive a losing strife ?
“ His was a kingdom mighty as thine own,
“ The sword his sceptre and the earth his throne—
“ The nations trembled when his awful eye
“ Gave to them leave to live or doom to die—
“ The Lord of Life—the Keeper of the grave,
“ His frown could wither and his smile could save—
“ Yet when his heart was hard, his spirit high

“ God drave him from his kingly majesty,
“ Far from the brotherhood of fellow men
“ To seek for dwelling in the desert den ;
“ Where the wild asses feed and oxen roam
“ He sought his pasture and he made his home,
“ And bitter-biting frost and dews of night
“ Schooled him in sorrow till he knew the right,
“ That God is ruler of the rulers still
“ And setteth up the sovereign that he will :—
“ Oh ! hadst thou treasured in repentant breast
“ His pride and fall, his penitence and rest,
“ And bowed submissive to Jehovah’s will,
“ Then had thy sceptre been a sceptre still—
“ But thou hast mocked the majesty of heaven,
“ And shamed the vessels to its service given,
“ And thou hast fashioned idols of thine own
“ Idols of gold, of silver, and of stone ;
“ To them hast bowed the knee, and breathed the breath,
“ And they must help thee in the hour of death.
“ Woe for the sign unseen, the sin forgot,
“ God was among ye, and ye knew it not !
“ Hear what he sayeth now, ‘ Thy race is run,
“ The years are numbered and the days are done,
“ Thy soul hath mounted in the scale of fate,

“ The Lord hath weighed thee and thou lackest weight ;
“ Now in thy palace porch the spoilers stand,
“ To seize thy sceptre, to divide thy land.’ ”—

He ended—and his passing foot was heard,
But none made answer, not a lip was stirred—
Mute the free tongue and bent the fearless brow,—
The mystic letters had their meaning now !
Soon came there other sound—the clash of steel,
The heavy ringing of the iron heel—
The curse in dying, and the cry for life,
The bloody voices of the battle strife.—

That night they slew him on his father’s throne,
The deed unnoticed and the hand unknown ;
Crownless and sceptreless Belshazzar lay,
A robe of purple, round a form of clay.

EDWIN ARNOLD.



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